



**A Flatlander Runs Through the Valley of a
Thousand Hills
at the 84th Comrades Marathon, May 24, 2009**

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Like thousands of other runners across the United States, I read Amby Burfoot's THE FAMOUS COMRADES MARATHON article in the May 2007 issue of Runner's World Magazine. Reading the article about the 55-mile event, I was reminded that this race is on my lifetime "must do" list and that I wasn't getting any younger. In fact, in 2009, the next "down year" of Comrades I would be turning 40 years old. What better way to celebrate a big birthday than by proving you're still a bad, if not perhaps dumb, ass?



Kelly and Rick earn medals



Sun sets on runners

I officially kicked off my training on October 31 by running a marathon in Indianapolis followed by the DRC Half the next day. Little did I realize back-to-back runs of those distances would become the norm in the months ahead. With the exception of running trails on Wednesday mornings, a scheduled rest day, I religiously followed the Comrades sub 11-hour finish training plan, which typically included a two-hour run on Saturday and a four to four hour and thirty minute Sunday run. The longest training run was 56k but you only had to run one weekend day so it was a bit of a treat.

Comrades is the oldest and largest Ultra in the world. The first run took place on May 24, 1921. It is a point-to-point course starting at City Hall in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa and finishing at Sahara Kings Mead Stadium in Durban in "down" years and vice versa in "up" years. There is a strict 12-hour cutoff;

one runner will be allowed to cross the finish line after 12 hours, but they still receive a DNF. It is said the first non-finisher becomes as famous as the winner does. The entire 12 hours of the race is broadcast on national TV in South Africa. It's rumored that across the entire country you can hear people cheering and counting down the last minute of the

race. At the stadium, the countdown is deafeningly loud. At 12 hours, one second, the time the first DNF occurred this year. Following a brief gasp, everyone immediately went silent. I stood in the stands hoarsely pleading for the runners with tears streaming down my face. Watching the finish was more tormenting than running.

Long before that time, I found myself standing in the dark with my best friend, Rick, at the starting line. The crowd began to sing "Shosholoza" an old Zulu mining song, and its title means, roughly, "Keep going. Move faster on those mountains." Even though I had no idea what they were singing, it was so lovely it brought me to tears (are you sensing a pattern here?). South African runners break out in song or chants throughout the entire race. Early on in the race as we were approaching a hill, Rick was told it was his turn to sing. He surprised me by belting out a loud and proud Deep in the Heart of Texas!

The route for Comrades flip-flops each year and the courses are referred to as up and down years. Odd numbered years are "down" years. I finally discovered the route our ancestors had to take to and from school all those years ago. You know the one -- where they have to walk uphill both ways. It might be a net downhill, but you run UP hill most of the first 50K before you start running down! Running downhill, especially long, steep down hills, isn't as easy as it sounds. Like I said, we were faithful to the training but this is Texas and it's flat! Comrades goes through the valley of a thousand hills. A THOUSAND and they all seemed to be on the race course! These aren't just hills, they're hills with names -- Polly Shortts, Inchanga, Bothas, Fileds and Cowies. As you can imagine, this was exhausting and more than a little scary as the realization set in that we were not trained for this many hills. But the scenery was gorgeous and the many hills provided plenty of opportunities to walk and take in the incredible scenery. Not surprising, the course is marked in kilometers. Interestingly, it's marked with how many kilometers you have left to run. The first marker reads 80 km. How's that for intimidating? Many runners get math/time stupid during a long distance race and I'm no exception. Somehow, throughout the entire race I was able to convert kilometers to miles and determine my approximate finish time. My math skills may have been okay, but my common sense failed to tell me that to determine what time it was I just needed to push the button on my watch to go from chrono to time. I needed to know the time to confirm I was ahead of the mid-course cut-off times.

In order to race, South African runners are required to be in a club. They must wear their club's kits. During major races, bibs with your name and number are worn in the front and back of your shirt only (you're not permitted to wear your bib on your shorts). Comrades has a special color system with their bibs; international runners are blue, those running their ninth Comrades wear yellow and those who have completed 10 or more Comrades have green bibs. The green bibs are permanently assigned numbers. Those runners own their bib number and the number will never be assigned again. A yellow bib gets you a lot of attention, a blue bib gets you even more. The runners and spectators are so appreciative of international runners participating in their race and visiting their country. It seems as if every runner is a Comrades veteran eager to dispense friendly and helpful advice. Hundreds of friendly runners wished us a good journey. Thousands of spectators cheered us on.

Nearly every kilometer of the race is covered with spectators. Cheers of well done, journey on and run strong were more fun to hear than great job and the common lies we often hear while racing in the US -- you're almost there or looking good. Spectators make a party out of the day. They bring picnic lunches for themselves and coolers packed with goodies for the runners. When you get hungry, you just yell out, I'd like a bread roll and someone gives you a sandwich. We came across every kind of sandwich from PB&J to tuna fish to butter and bacon, which according to Rick was awesome. There were lots of boiled potatoes, biscuits (cookies), oranges and bananas. The refreshment stations served Coca-Cola and Crème Soda, which is green! Water and sports drink are given out in sachets. I liked them because they were very cold and I could carry them for a while and get a nice cooling effect. I hated them because I could never get them open! I don't know how I can bite my cheek and instantly draw blood but I can't use my teeth to get a thin little plastic baggie of liquid open.

Another unique feature at this race is the physio stations. These are a cross between a MASH unit and a massage parlor. Dozens of volunteers are ready to rub cream, perform ice massages or tape sore and cramping legs. I indulged myself with two stops to have my calves rubbed with ice, which felt wonderful. The volunteers were miraculously gentle, yet effective.

I know our halfway split because we were at the halfway-mark when the winner crossed the finish line! The winning time was 5:23 a mere three minutes slower than the course record.

Bruce Fordyce, nine-time Comrades winner, dubbed the "Comrades King" gave the advice to finish with dignity. I took that a step further and decided that to finish with dignity you must run the whole race with dignity. In the first 50K, we ran past a facility for disabled children. There were dozens of children, some in wheelchairs and some without hands all cheering. We high-fived every one of those kids. This time, even Rick was moved to tears.

Here comes the bus! Here comes the bus! Stay on the bus! Not something, you typically hear at a race. The pace groups are called buses. The spectators love when the buses go by. Some of the buses were huge with over fifty runners bunched together. The bus "drivers" didn't just pace, they provided instruction, encouragement, sang, chanted and stretched. Strangely, while walking uphill every runner would raise their arms above their heads. At first, we thought there was an overhead camera on the course and everyone was waving. Then Rick started doing it, too. When I asked what he was doing he said, I don't know, whatever everyone else is doing. There must be a reason they're all doing it. So, I joined in too and eventually figured out we were simply stretching. I got on and off the bus several times throughout my run. With 20K left to go, I didn't want to walk, so I left the bus behind. That gave me a huge moral boost. I needed the boost because with 30K left, I started thinking sweet, there's only 30K left! Somewhere around 28K, I realized I could be out on the course for three more hours. Three more hours sounded like forever. I couldn't stand the thought of running for three more hours and I was near tears (again!) until I asked myself why it sounded so awful. I couldn't

really come up with a good answer and reminded myself that I'm privileged to be a runner, that I asked God to be glorified by my effort and that I promised myself I'd run with dignity. Crying was no longer an option. Besides, I only had to get to the next kilometer. I didn't need to tackle all 28K at once.

Somehow, 12,000 runners didn't spread out that much and the roads were crowded much of the race. For the first 50K, I kept saying I couldn't believe how many people there were. It wasn't uncomfortable or difficult to run but it was crowded. It wasn't until the last 10K that the road really opened up and that was because we were on the highway. Imagine a city closing down the main highway for the entire day. The last few kilometers are through the city streets of Durban and there are hundreds of people lining the street. I ran on one side of the road high-fiving everyone I could reach. With three kilometers left, I stopped to walk for a moment to collect myself and ensure I had enough left to finish strong. I wanted to enter the stadium with a burst of speed. By now, I knew Rick was right when he said I could break 10:30 and he sent me on ahead at the 50K mark, with the command to go kick some ass. The $\frac{3}{4}$ -lap finish on the grass of the Sahara Kingsmead (cricket) Stadium is an exhilarating finish.

My goal was to finish. My plan was to break 11:00 hours. My time was *10:21:51, earning a bronze finisher's medal. Rick finished in *11:19:12, earning a Vic Clapham medal. There are six different finisher's medals. The medal you received depends on your finishing time.

One thing I've learned is that if I can dream it, then I can achieve it. No goal, no matter how outrageous, is out of reach as long as I'm willing to work hard and I have support from my running club comrades who make the journey worth the trip.

*Comrades uses chip timing however no consideration is given for the time it takes you to get to the starting line. Gun time is the only recorded time.